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Review: Necromantism – travelling to meet the dead, 1750-1860

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Necromanticism: travelling to meet the dead, 1750-1860

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BOOK REVIEW

Necromanticism: travelling to meet the dead, 1750–1860, by Paul Westover, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, vii + 217 pp., £50.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-230-30443-7

In this well-researched, thought-provoking and highly interesting monograph, Paul Westover brings to life the activity of visiting deceased authors' homes, haunts and graves in the long Romantic period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Travelling to meet the dead has long been a feature of the literary tourism landscape and, as such, the book critically explores the characteristic practices and compulsions of literary pilgrimage. Consequently, Westover offers an inspired contribution to understanding Romanticism in the context of death studies and travel history. Despite the provocative play on the word 'necro', this book takes the reader on a journey with Romantic tourists as they tour and write about the homes, landscapes and graves of illustrious dead authors. Westover maintains that in this attempt to bridge the distance between life and death, tourists of the day dramatised the desires, anxieties and debates of Romanticism. Indeed, in an age of revolutions and mass print, antiquarian revival, and a love of books, ghost-hunting and monument-building, the emergent 'Necromantic' culture created touristic habits that arguably continue to the present day.

Westover begins his monograph with the 1809 *Essay on Sepulchres* by William Godwin, in which Godwin calls for an 'atlas of those who have lived, for the use of men hereafter to be born' (p. 1). Thus, Westover commences the complex polygonal task of interrogating how the 'atlas', in the form of memorials, books and touristic pilgrimages to graves of the Significant Other Dead, was manifested in the Romantic period. What emerges are fundamental linkages between travel and reading, in which a Romantic literary culture, anchored by a sentimental cult of the dead, competes with 'canon' and 'shrines'. As Westover argues, 'despite decades of work on Romanticism and the sense of place . . . scholarship has yet to sufficiently address the Romantic effort to tie the literary canon to places, and specifically to places hallowed by authors' bodies' (p. 3).

In the book's opening comments, Westover introduces the reader to the physical and imaginary activities of *literary pilgrimage* as a central tenet for Necromanticism. He divides the concept into two main areas: author-centred tours (such as visits to dead writers' graves, birthplaces and homes), and text-centred tours (visits to locations described in the literature and/or thought to provide the 'originals' for fiction). Subsequently, Westover provides a context for Necromanticism and its many analogous oscillations between the 'ideal' and the 'real'. In doing so, the introductory comments provide the reader with a rudimentary, if not useful grounding in the Romantic interplays between geographical and imaginary terrains, between implied authors and embodied ones, and between the literary and physical relics of dead authors.

Chapter 1 engages with the Scottish Enlightenment's theorisation of the 'ideal presence' and how the dead are both remembered and imagined. Despite being rather succinct in comparison with others in the book, this first chapter sets the foundations of Necromanticism, in

that to read is to conjure up the dead, while to tour a gravesite is to read. Westover, therefore, proposes, somewhat unsurprisingly, that literary tourism enacts readers' fantasies of the ideal presence, and that tourists 'see history coming to life before them' (p. 11). Drawing on the work of Kames, the chapter briefly examines the ideal presence at work in the Romantic period and how graves, as tools of semiotics, practically define presence, albeit presence predicated on the pain of absence. By examining Romantic literary tourism as some kind of imaginative economy, the chapter concludes by attempting to bring the debate up to date with issues of existentialism and authenticity within modern tourism: though the concluding comments are largely superficial and lack critical synergy.

Chapter 2 provides a useful lineage for literary tourism by tracing its roots in religious pilgrimages, the European Grand Tour and native landscape touring. Westover argues that the discovery of the national dead during the Romantic period allowed not only literary tourism to emerge and expand, but also to take on a Necromantic stamp. This history forms the underpinning for the book's core chapter, Chapter 3, which offers insights into the intersections of reading and travel. Returning to the work of William Godwin, as well as the writings of Hazlitt and Wordsworth, Westover offers a critical account of tourism as a mode of biographical reading and, consequently, as both a celebration and a test of the Romantic author myth. Crucially, the chapter argues that touristic encounters at dead authors' graves were an allegory of reading: a trial of presence and absence, and of sight and imagination. In the second half of the chapter, Westover takes on the task of exploring how literary tourism became nationalised through the tourism heritage industry. In doing so, he implies rather than critically explores the literary dead as an access point to culture and, as such, suggests that tourists, through their reading and visiting of graves, contribute to a mortality consciousness.

Chapter 4 emphasises that texts and travel do not merely reinforce one another: they mirror each other. In short, tourism, in part at least, finds templates in literary form. Drawing on graveside tribute poems, particularly by Hemans, Westover argues that these not only helped charge locations with emotion but also allowed for a distortion of the dead. A self-styled 'interlude' follows, in which Westover offers an intuitive account of the effects of literary tourism on writers, rather than on tourists. The interlude works well if the book is being read from cover to cover by breaking the text and summarising key points. However, the book can be read equally well if individual chapters are taken out of order or as stand-alone texts. In such cases, the interlude section would have been better presented as an additional chapter, allowing the reader to pick and choose relevant points.

The book returns to format in Chapter 5, in which Westover explores what British heritage sites meant for Americans in their early period of self-definition and identity-building. Interestingly, the chapter raises the provocative notion of whether Americans, through their touristic consumption of British heritage, were legitimate heirs of Britain: especially of dead British authors. The final chapter then explores the emergence and work of a lesser known, tourism-driving genre: the illustration book. Such books identified the 'originals' of fictional locations and characters, thus encouraging tourists to visit them. The chapter focuses on Walter Scott and the impact of his work across the Anglophone world. As Westover states: 'Scott himself had a hand in promoting literary tourism, and in death he continued to haunt it, having left behind monuments for tourists and a massive web of touristic texts' (p. 15). Crucially, it is these texts that constitute an essential archive for tracing the persistence of Necromanticism through the ages.

This well-written and engaging book undoubtedly offers fascinating insights on literary genres, touristic practices, canon-formation and cultural nationalism. Yet, it lacks any

convincing insight into Necromanticism with regard to current critical trends in the modern tourism heritage industry. Westover does attempt to bring his findings up to date with current tourism and popular culture practices and material, particularly in the final chapter, but these are sparse and not particularly well-scrutinised. Moreover, the book would have benefited by acknowledging the present-day equivalent of Necromanticism, i.e. *Thanatourism*, and its fundamental interrelationships with the Thanatological condition of contemporary society. This criticism aside, Westover's investigation of the cult of the literary dead brings Romantic culture very much alive. For that reason, this book will be a valuable resource and welcome addition to bookshelves of Thanatologists, historians, tourism-heritage scholars and students.

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